

A PIECE of STRING

IS A WONDERFUL THING

Judy Hindley illustrated by Margaret Chamberlain



Discover what a spider's
web and a yo-yo have
in common ...



Imagine a world without string...



READ

AND

WONDER

*How did a thing like string begin?
Back in the days when mammoths
roamed, how did anyone
THINK IT UP?*

In jam-packed, rollicking verse, Judy Hindley speculates on the origins and evolution of string: an everyday object we take for granted. How did people catch fish, for example, before they had lines and nets? And what did they use to hold up their pants before they had suspenders or belts? Moving chronologically from rawhide strips, to spun vegetable fibers like cotton, to three-ply rope, probably invented in ancient Egypt, to the use of spun metal in suspension bridges, pulleys, and winches; string finally catches up to modern times.

With lots of facts and examples supplementing the main text in the form of hand-lettered notes, and a panorama of Margaret Chamberlain's evocative images snaking stringlike across the page, this highly original book guarantees that you'll never think of string in the same way again.

Read and Wonder Books

Picture books with a *real* difference. These innovative books combine elements of the best picture books—exciting stories, poems, and artwork—with elements of the best nonfiction—intriguing facts and ideas. They invite children to learn about the world around them, encouraging them to think, to question, to wonder.

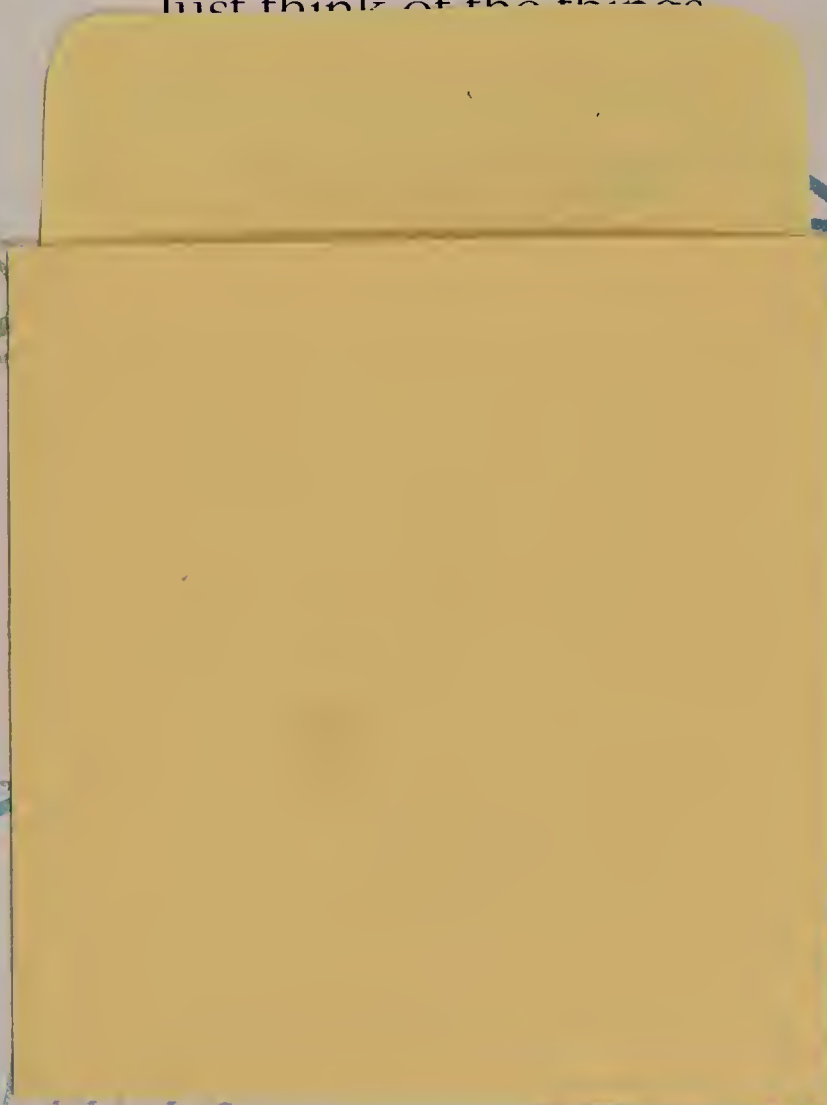


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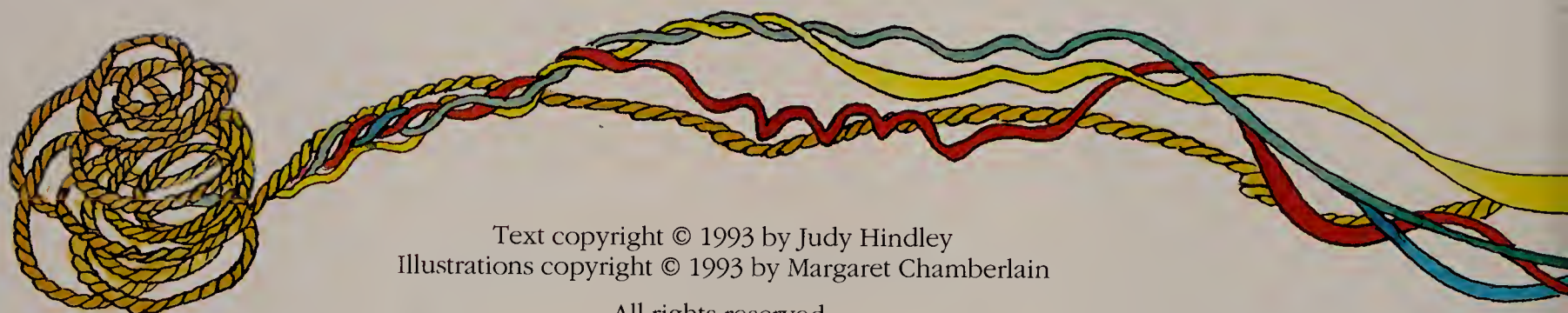
What a wonderful
thing string is!
Just think of the things



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For John and Anna with love
J.H.

For Anne Veronica, with love
M.C.



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The illustrations in this book were done in inks,
watercolor, gouache, and acrylic paints.

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IS A WONDERFUL THING

Judy Hindley
illustrated by Margaret Chamberlain

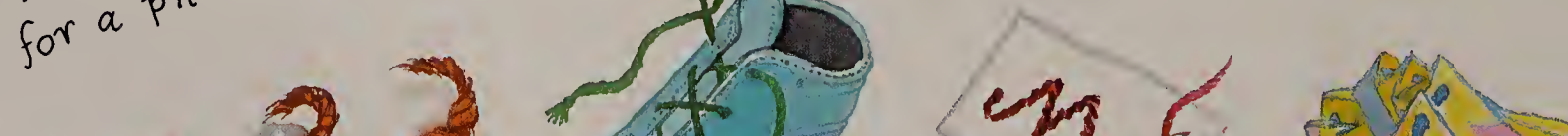


CANDLEWICK PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Let us sing a song
about string—
what a wonderful thing it is!
When you think of the things
that you do with string,
you have to admit
it's a marvelous bit
to have in your kit:

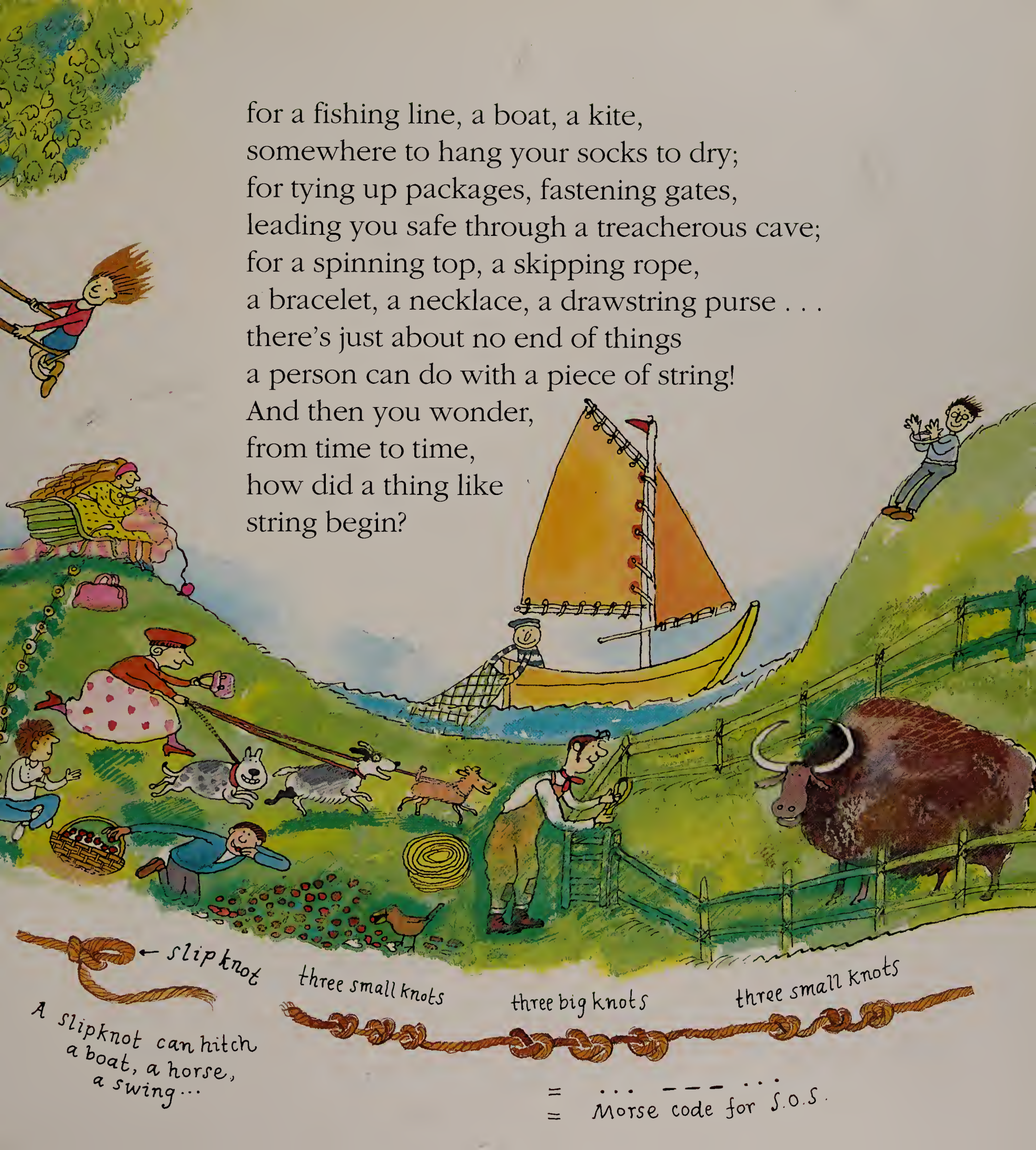
A vibrant, hand-drawn illustration of a village scene. In the foreground, a woman in a red dress and blue apron hangs laundry on a line. A donkey is being led by a man in a yellow shirt. A boy is running with a bag, and a girl is sitting in a hammock under a large tree. A kite flies in the sky. The scene is set in a grassy field with a large tree on the right and a fence in the background. The overall style is whimsical and colorful.

My friend
for a phone call



change

for a fishing line, a boat, a kite,
somewhere to hang your socks to dry;
for tying up packages, fastening gates,
leading you safe through a treacherous cave;
for a spinning top, a skipping rope,
a bracelet, a necklace, a drawstring purse . . .
there's just about no end of things
a person can do with a piece of string!
And then you wonder,
from time to time,
how did a thing like
string begin?



← slipknot

three small knots

three big knots

three small knots

A slipknot can hitch
a boat, a horse,
a swing...

= . . . - - - . . .
= Morse code for S.O.S.

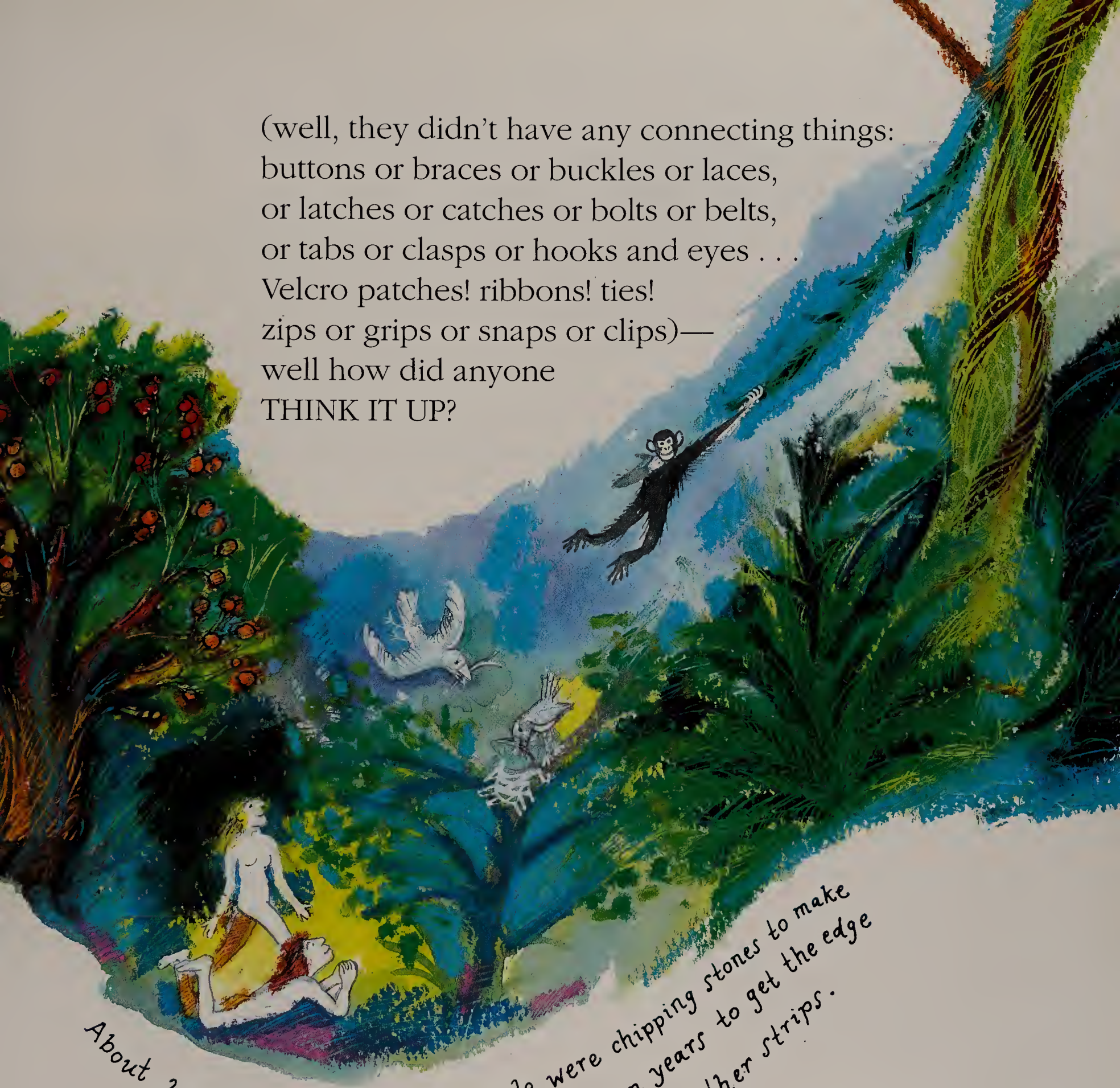
Back in the days
when mammoths roamed,
and they didn't have chains
and they didn't have ropes
for hauling around or
lifting things up—



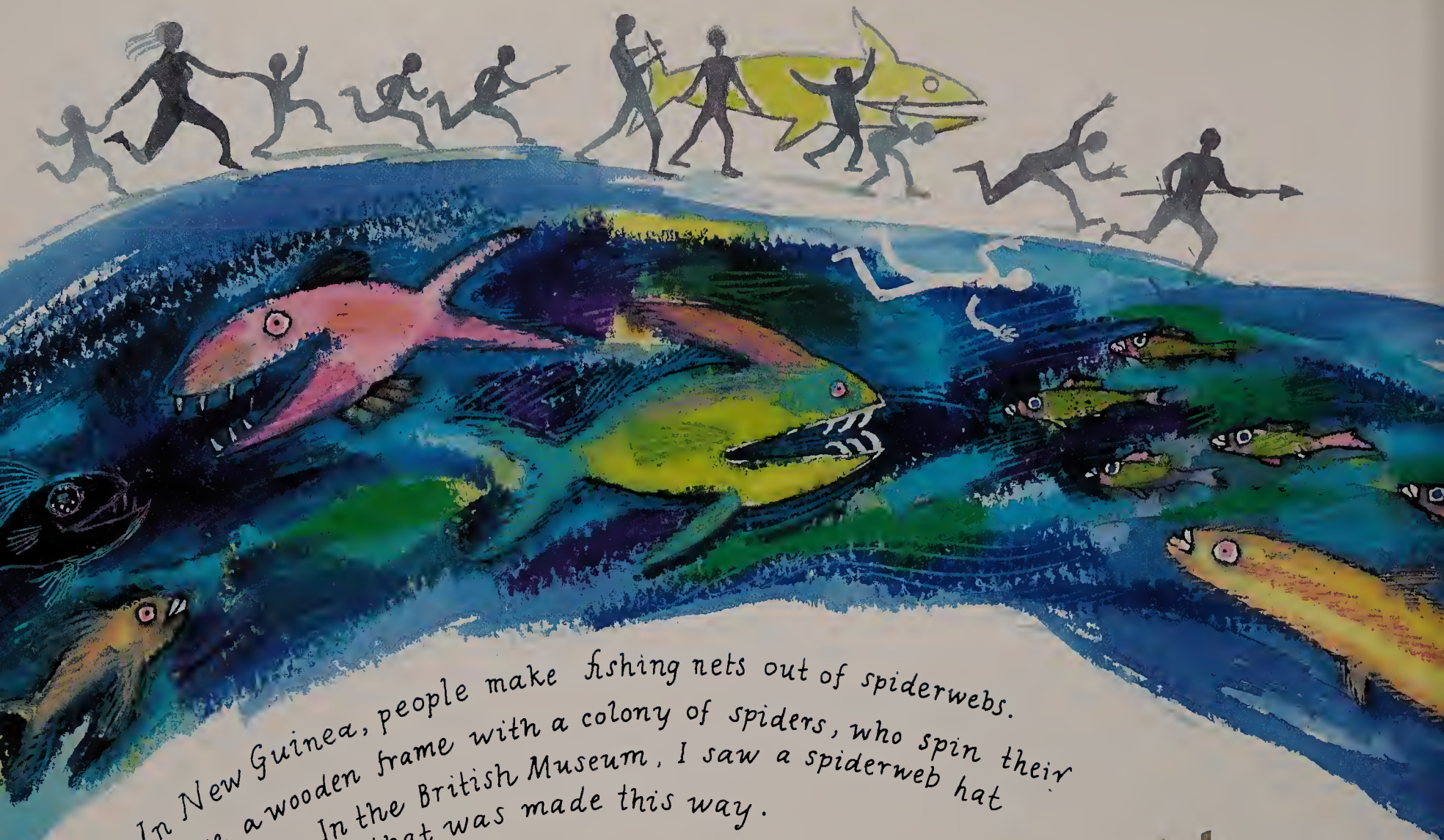
The bodies of birds and
animals are worked by living strings called sinews.



(well, they didn't have any connecting things:
buttons or braces or buckles or laces,
or latches or catches or bolts or belts,
or tabs or clasps or hooks and eyes . . .
Velcro patches! ribbons! ties!
zips or grips or snaps or clips)—
well how did anyone
THINK IT UP?



About 2.5 million years ago, people were chipping stones to make
a cutting edge, but it took us 2 million years to get the edge
sharp enough to cut out leather strips.

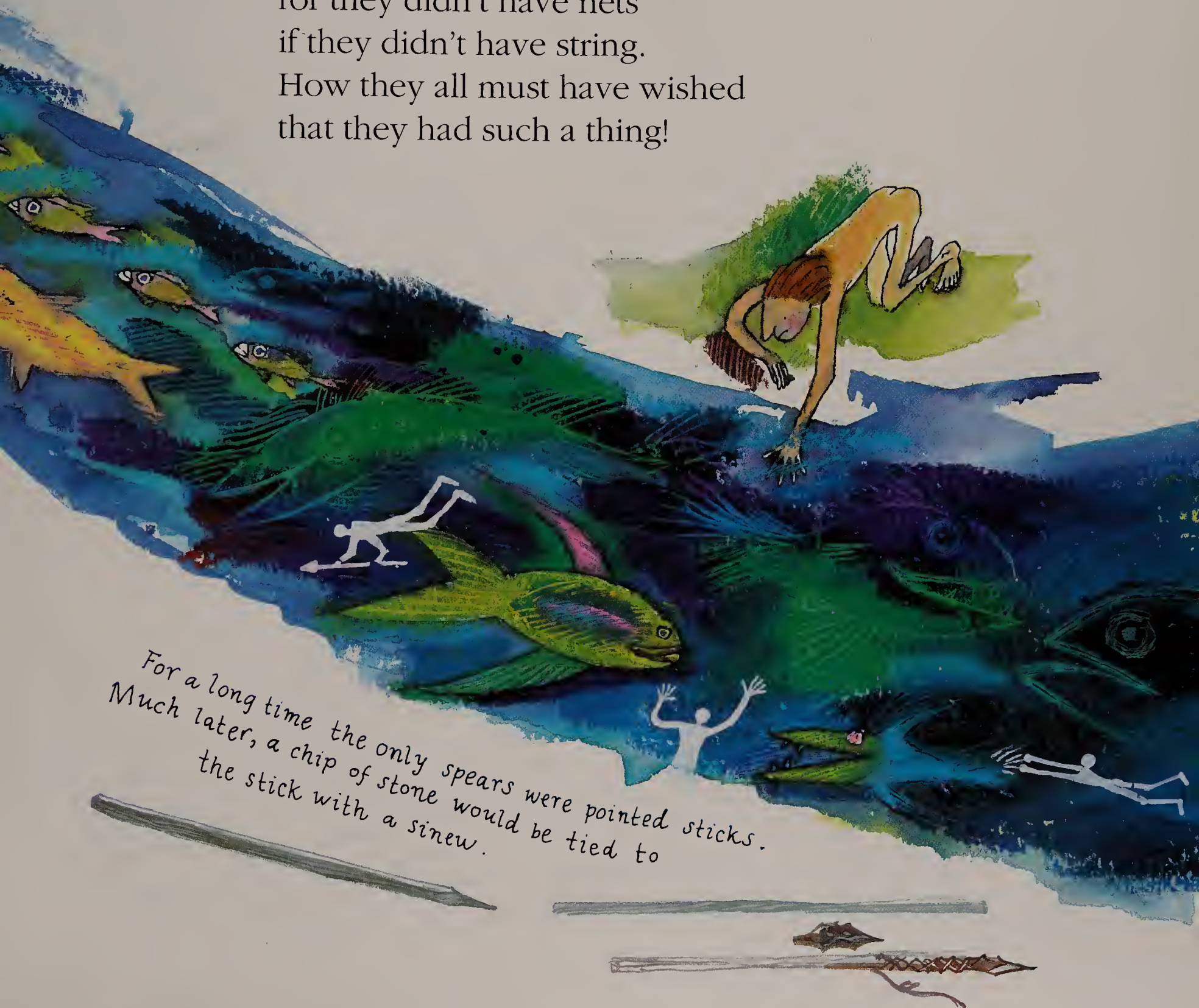


In New Guinea, people make fishing nets out of spiderwebs.
They leave a wooden frame with a colony of spiders, who spin their
webs around it. In the British Museum, I saw a spiderweb hat
that was made this way.

Did they chat as they sat
near the fire at night,
eating their prehistoric fish,
and say, "What we need
to get it right
is a thing like hair,
but long and strong,
a thing to tie on a piece of bone:
what a wonderful fishing line
that would make!"?

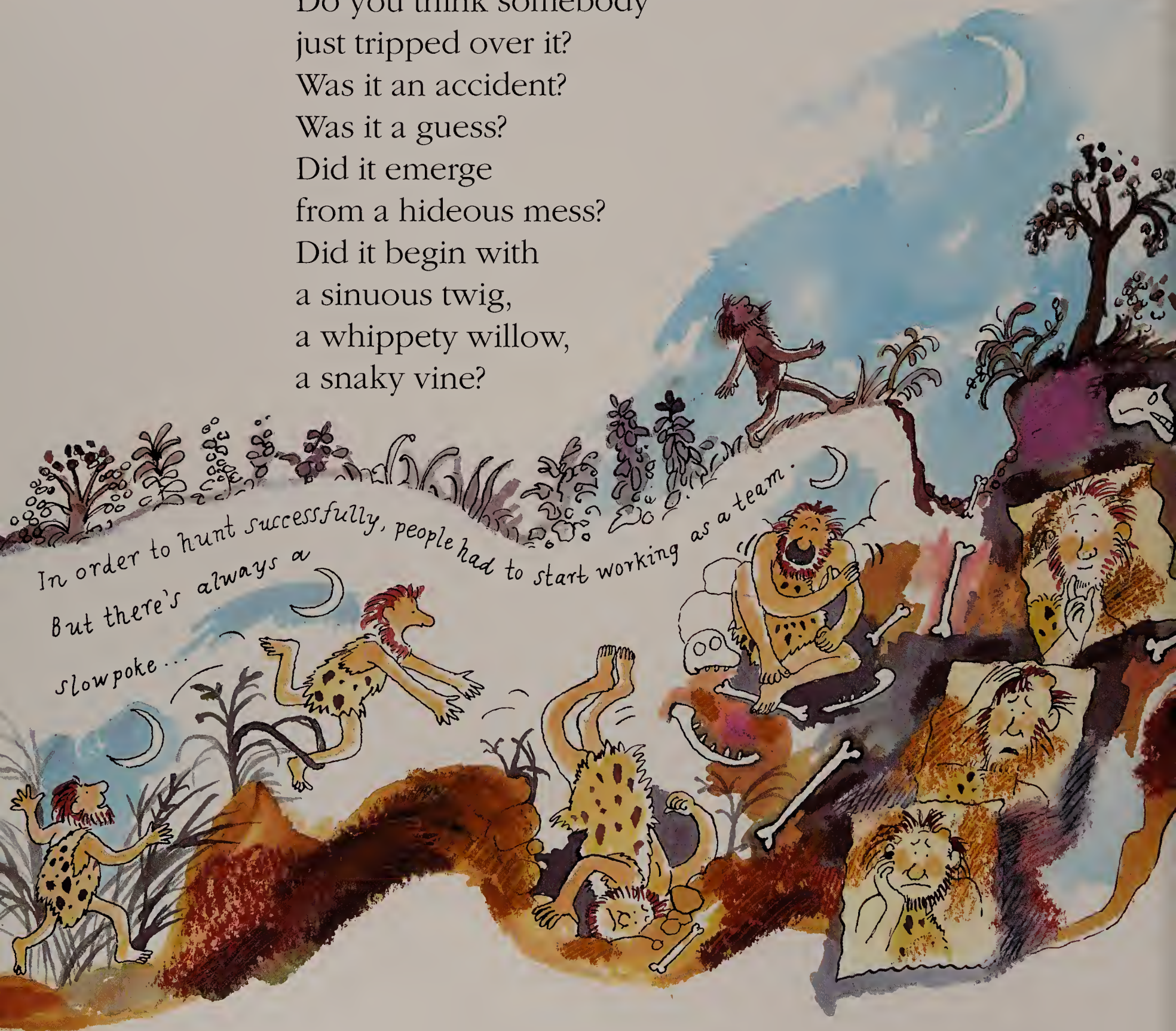


After which, I suppose,
they went out to the lake
and tickled the fish
with their cold, bare hands—
for they didn't have nets
if they didn't have string.
How they all must have wished
that they had such a thing!



For a long time the only spears were pointed sticks.
Much later, a chip of stone would be tied to
the stick with a sinew.

So how on earth
do you think they discovered it?
Do you think somebody
just tripped over it?
Was it an accident?
Was it a guess?
Did it emerge
from a hideous mess?
Did it begin with
a sinuous twig,
a whippety willow,
a snaky vine?



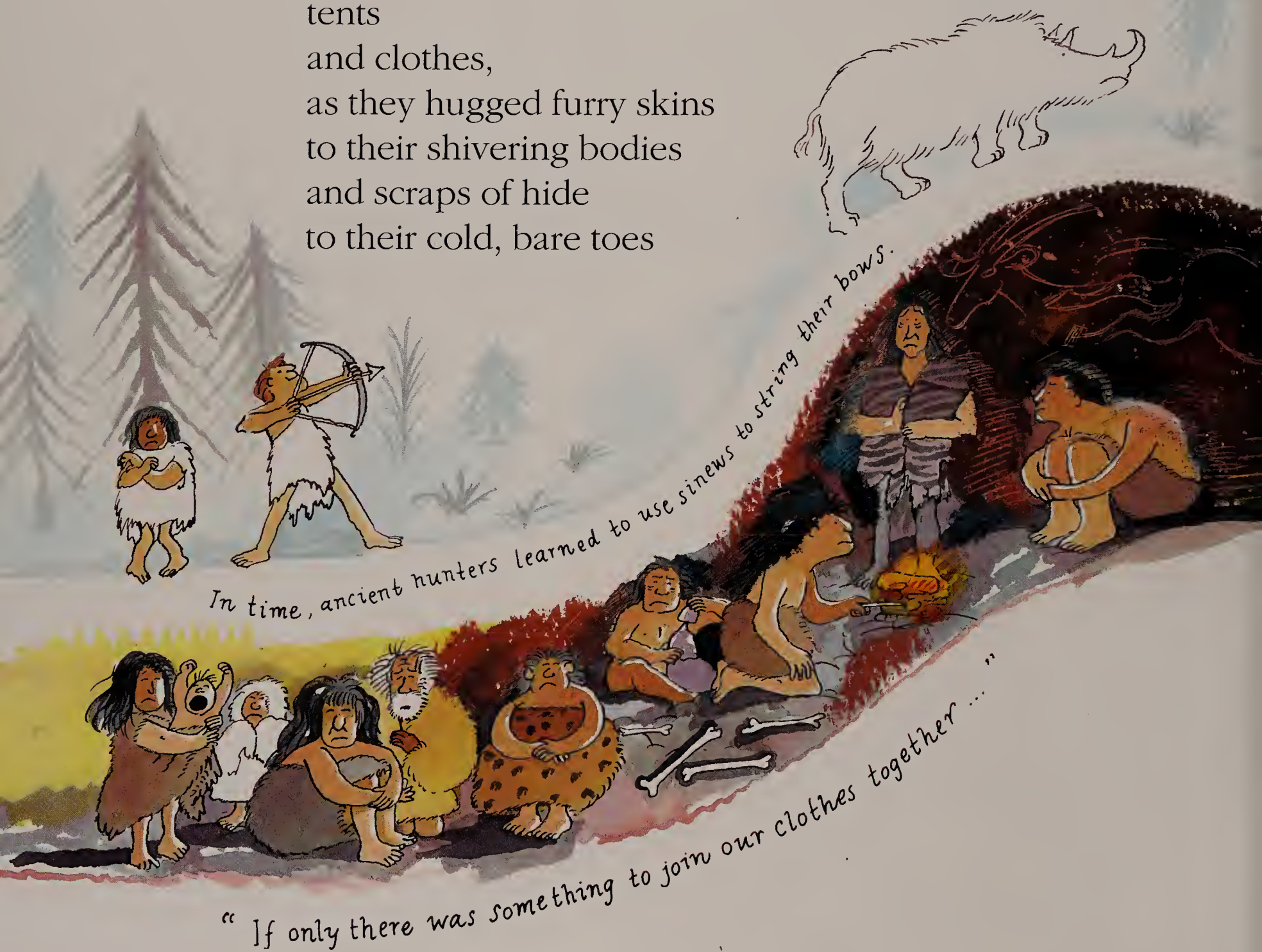
In order to hunt successfully, people had to start working as a team.
But there's always a
slowpoke...

Did it happen that somebody, one dark night,
winding his weary way home alone,
got tripped by the foot on a loop of vine
and fell kersplat! and broke a bone;
and then, as he lay in the dark, so sad,
and yelled for help (and it didn't come)
he got thoroughly bored with doing that
and invented—a woolly-rhinoceros trap?



*Teams of hunters drove their prey over cliffs
or possibly into holes hidden by vines.*

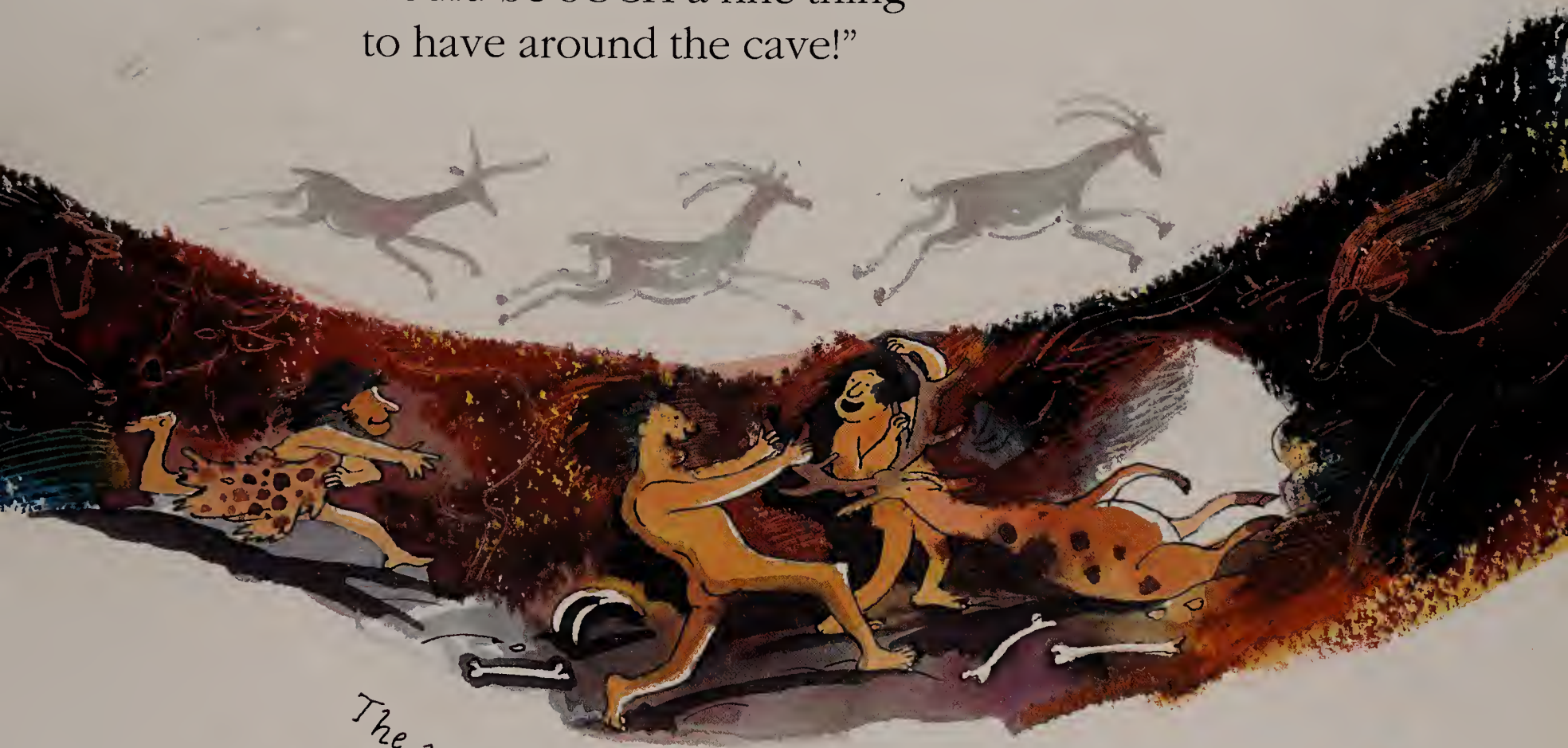
Oh, it might have occurred in a number of ways
as the populace pondered the fate they faced—
as they huddled in caves
in the worst of the weather,
wishing for things like
tents
and clothes,
as they hugged furry skins
to their shivering bodies
and scraps of hide
to their cold, bare toes



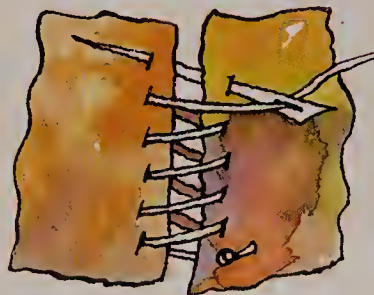
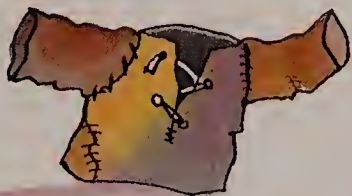
In time, ancient hunters learned to use sinews to string their bows.

"If only there was something to join our clothes together..."

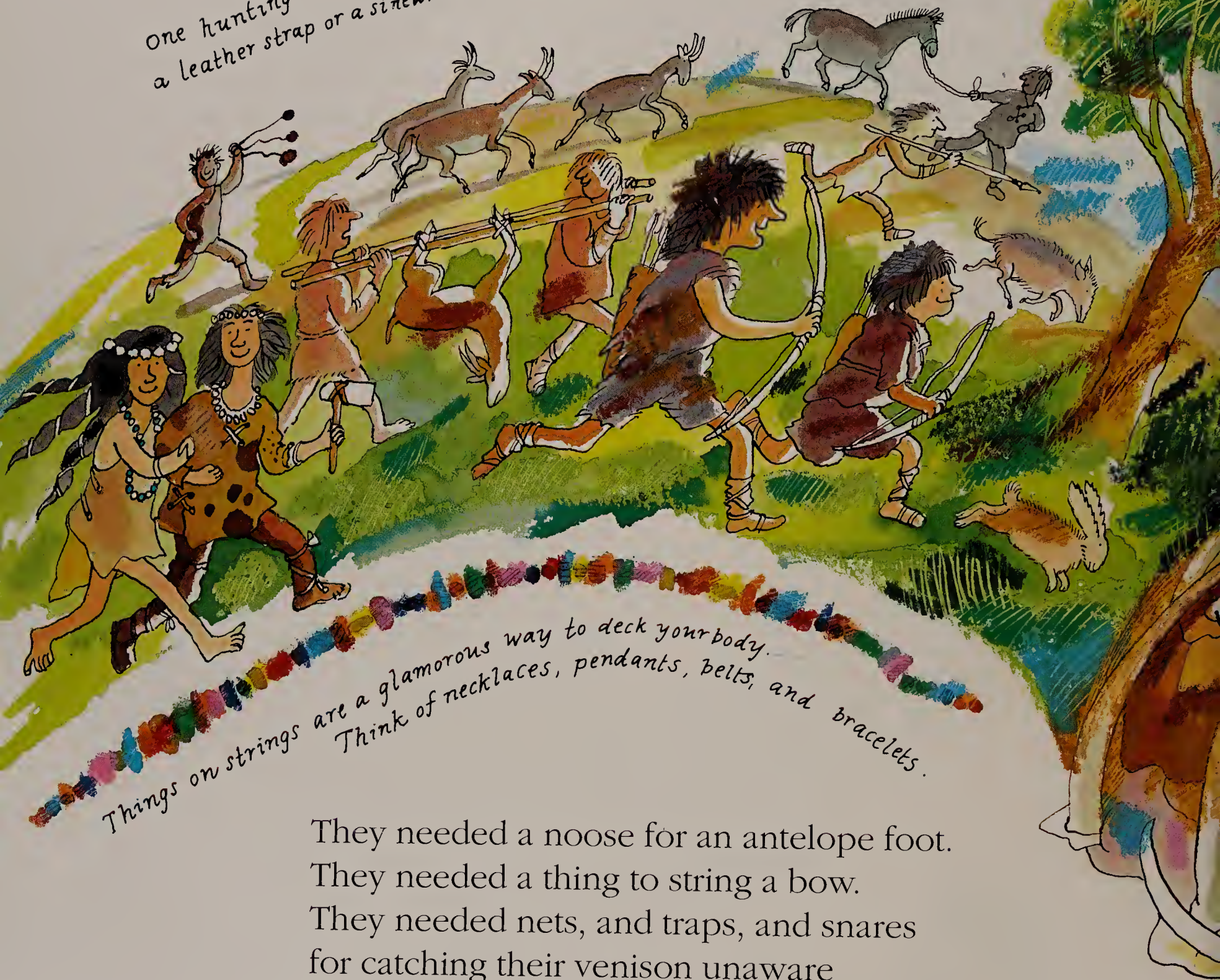
And they had no suspenders
or snaps or connectors
or buttons or toggles
or zippers or pins—
so HOW did they hold up their trousers, then?
They must have said,
“Oh! A piece of string
would be SUCH a fine thing
to have around the cave!”



The very first needles were probably thorns.



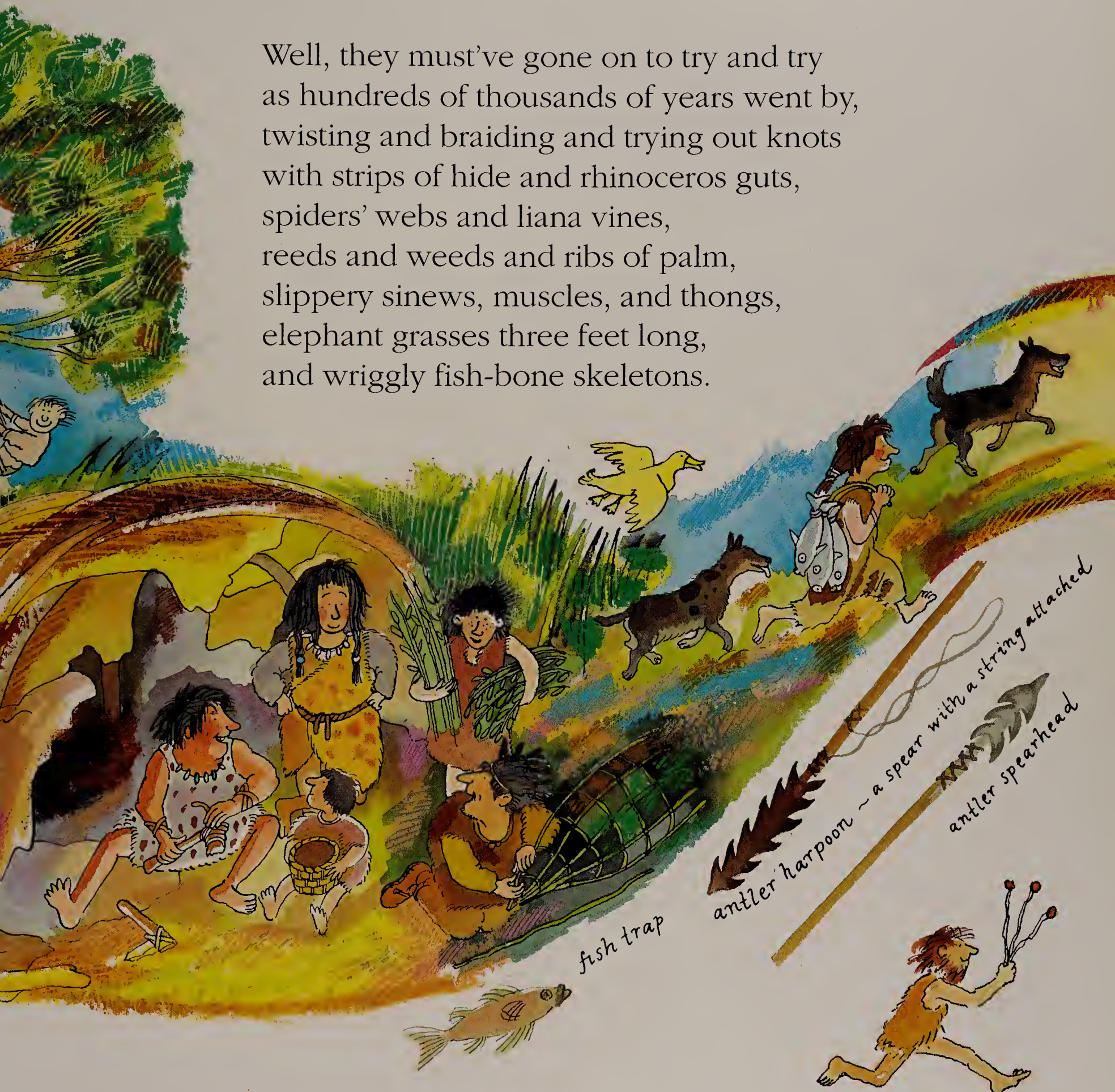
one hunting breakthrough was the bolas — three stones tied to a leather strap or a sinew. It was thrown around an animal's legs to trip it.



Things on strings are a glamorous way to deck your body. Think of necklaces, pendants, belts, and bracelets.

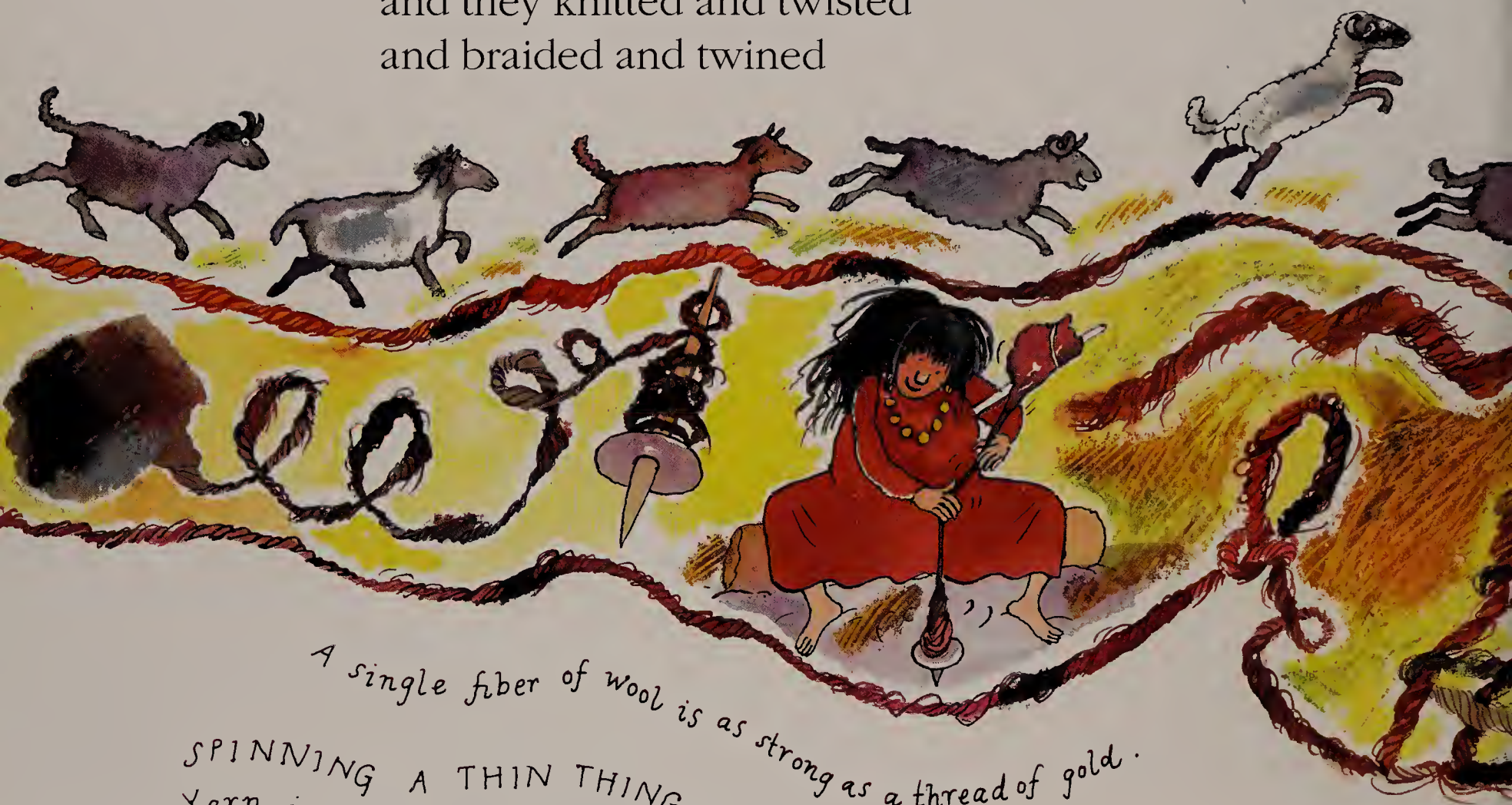
They needed a noose for an antelope foot.
They needed a thing to string a bow.
They needed nets, and traps, and snares
for catching their venison unaware
and leading the first wild horses home.

Well, they must've gone on to try and try
as hundreds of thousands of years went by,
twisting and braiding and trying out knots
with strips of hide and rhinoceros guts,
spiders' webs and liana vines,
reeds and weeds and ribs of palm,
slippery sinews, muscles, and thongs,
elephant grasses three feet long,
and wriggly fish-bone skeletons.



antler harpoon ~ a spear with a string attached
antler spearhead

And they spun out the fibers
of vegetable fluff,
and they felted the hairs of a goat,
and they knitted and twisted
and braided and twined



A single fiber of wool is as strong as a thread of gold.
SPINNING A THIN THING FROM A FAT THING
Yarn is spun from sheep's fleece, cotton tufts, or even birds' down.
Try spinning with cotton. Pull and stretch it very gently,
very steadily, twisting it really tight as it draws out.



and invented . . .



TURNING A THIN THING INTO A FLAT THING
The next trick is weaving and knitting to make fabric.
Tiny short hairs laid down, higgledy-piggledy, then
wetted and pressed together, can be turned into felt.



the three-ply rope!
What a wonderful thing!
A very fine thing!
The KING of string
is rope!



Making Rope

One man twists
two strands
clockwise and
walks forward.

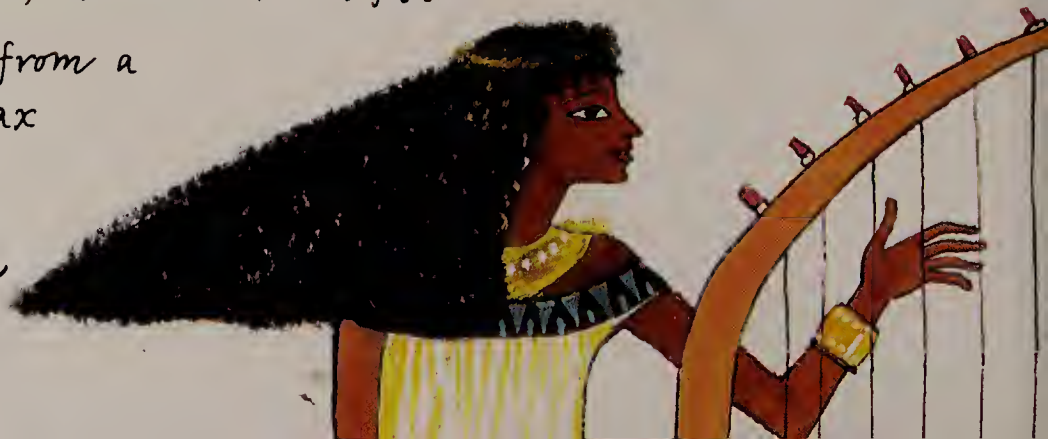
A second man
makes
sure the strands
of rope are laid
tightly together.

A third man
closes the
strands by
twisting this tool
counterclockwise
and walks backward
as the rope is
formed.

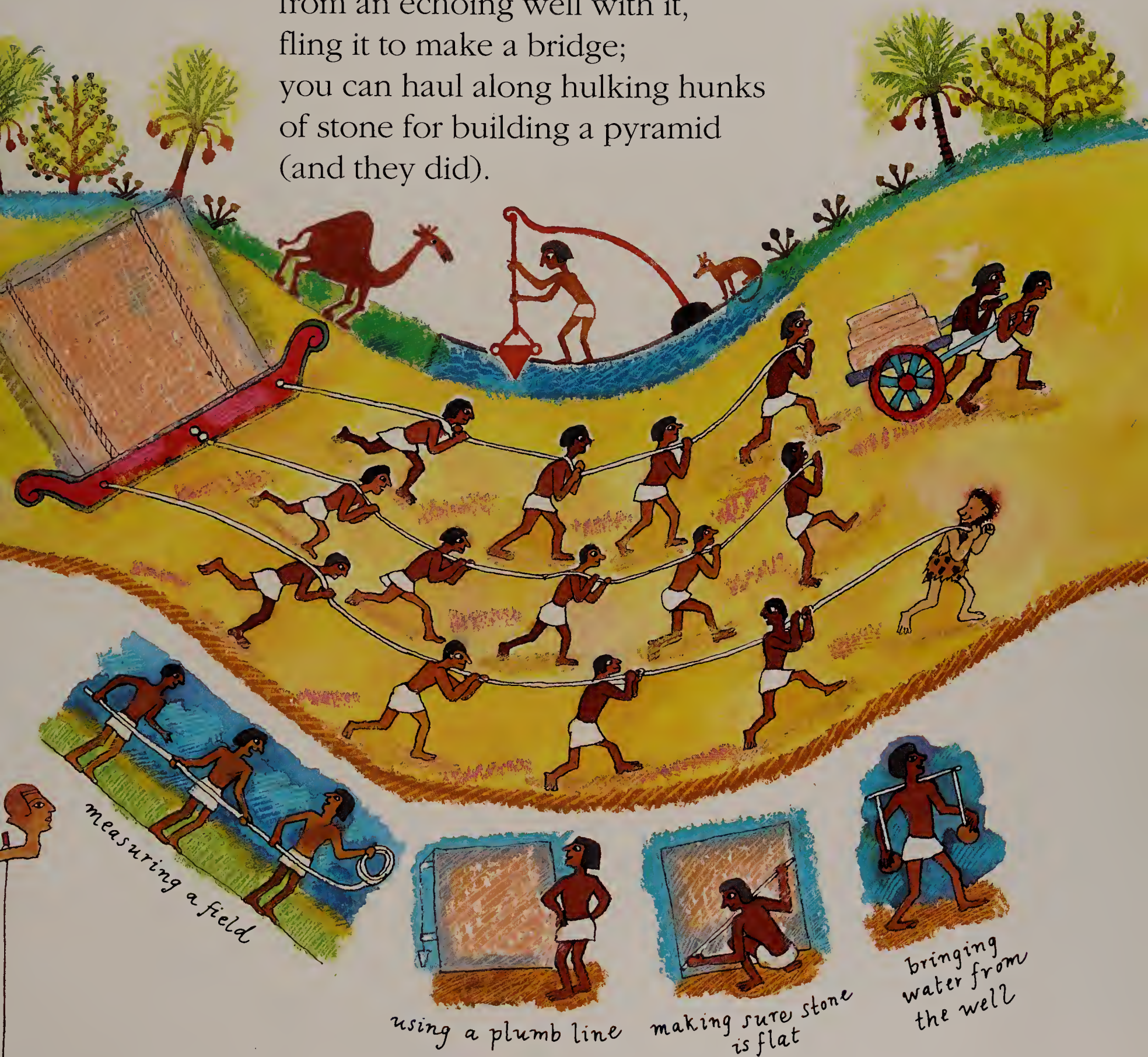
The Egyptians made rope from bulrushes, camel hair, and flax.

The oldest rope ever discovered came from a tomb in Egypt. It was made from flax 5000 years ago.

Sometimes rope was even made from women's hair.



You can lift up pots
from an echoing well with it,
fling it to make a bridge;
you can haul along hulking hunks
of stone for building a pyramid
(and they did).



measuring a field

using a plumb line

making sure stone
is flat

bringing
water from
the well

You can also halter and harness
your animal friends.



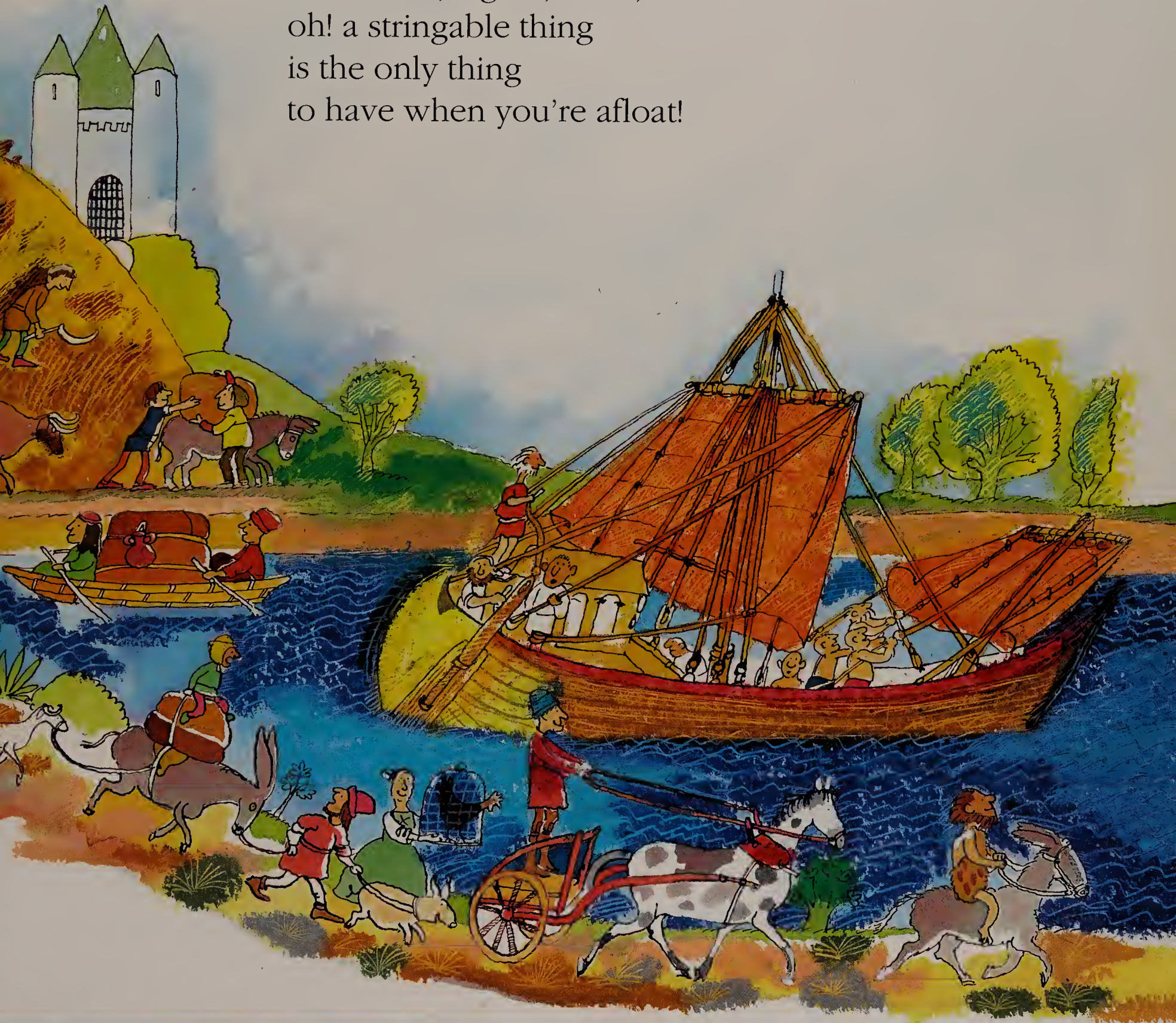
The first plow was probably just
a forked branch tied to an ox.



Our earliest picture of a sailing boat
is on a 3000-year-old Egyptian pot.

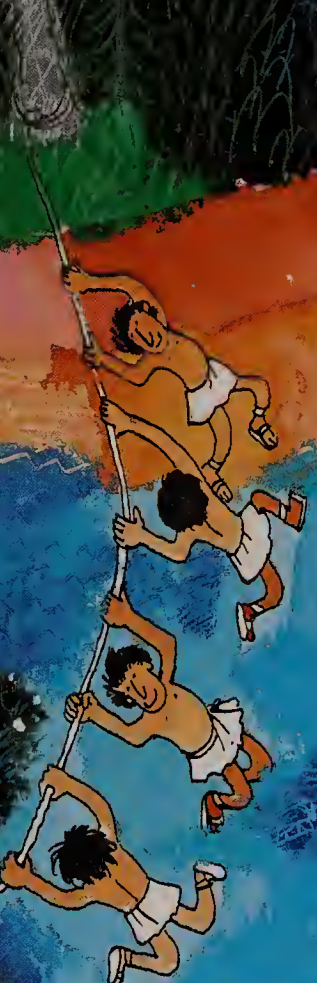


And then again, when life gets tough
and it's time to be moving along,
you can use it to lash your luggage fast
to a camel, a goat, a raft, a boat—
oh! a stringable thing
is the only thing
to have when you're afloat!



But they still
went on and on,
sticking and spinning
and looping and gluing
and tying and trying out
more and more types,
quicker and quicker
crazier, slicker

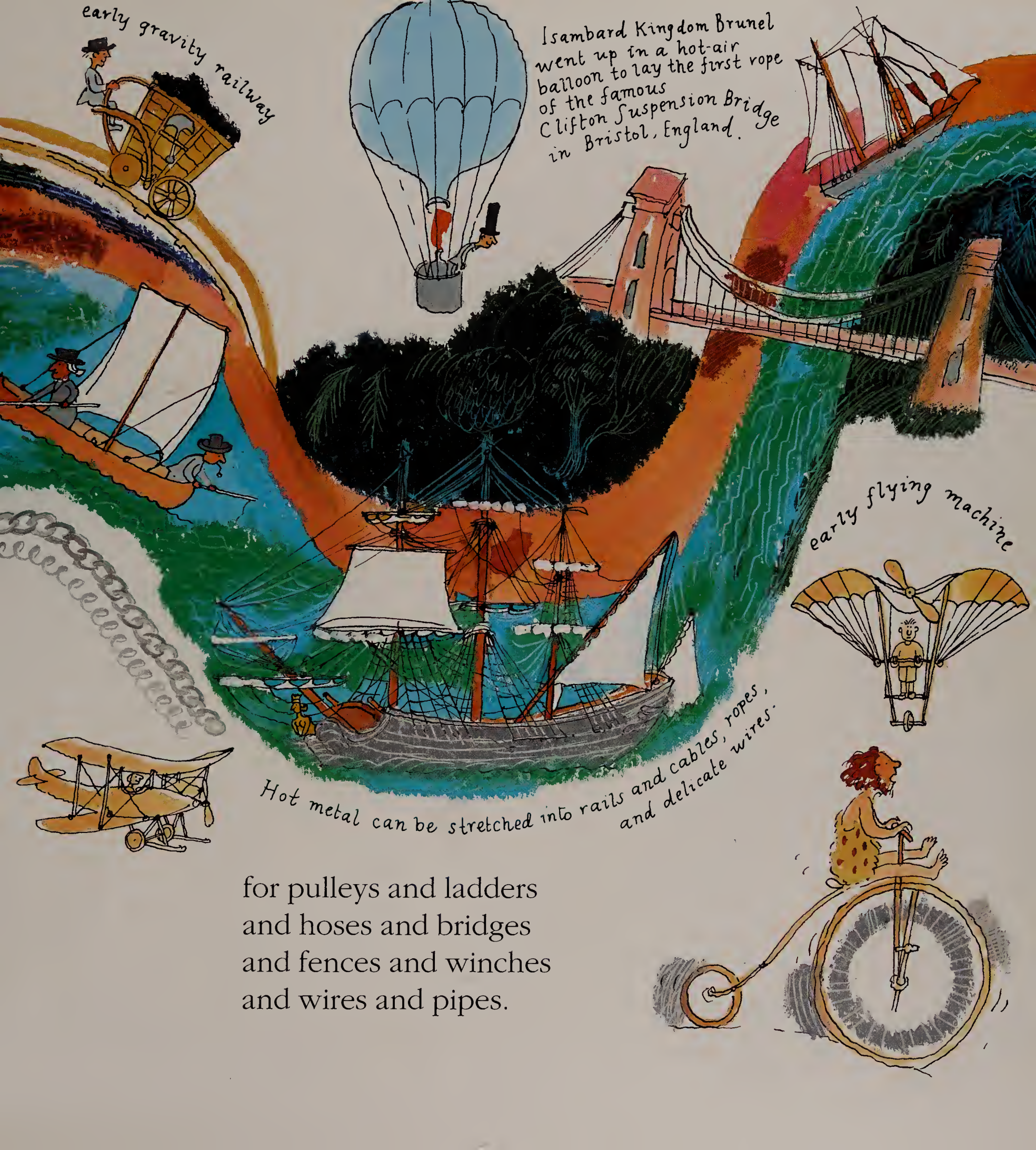
early cart



The pontoon bridge was an
early bright idea. It began
with a row of boats
all roped together.



Roman crane



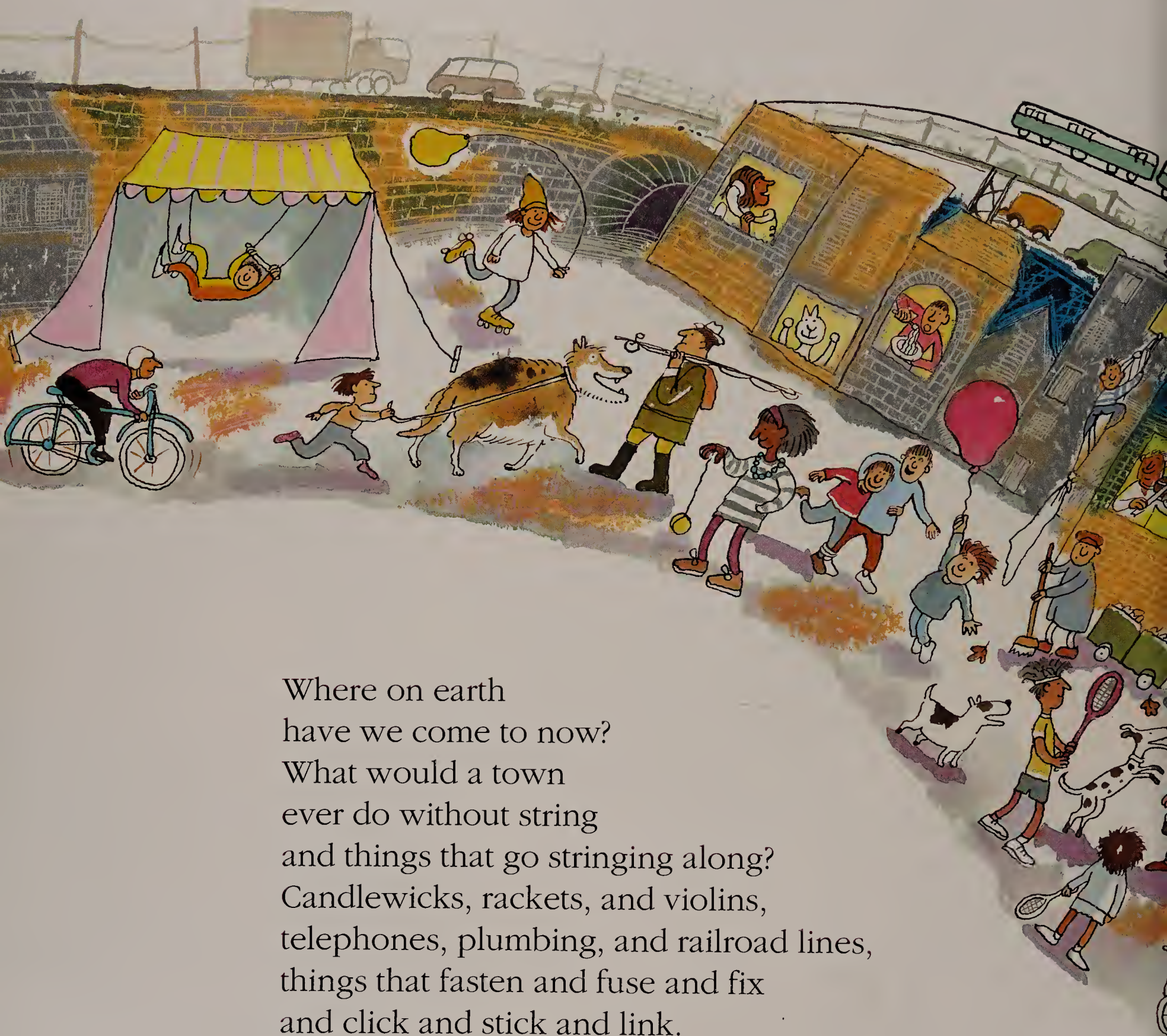
early gravity railway

Isambard Kingdom Brunel
went up in a hot-air
balloon to lay the first rope
of the famous
Clifton Suspension Bridge
in Bristol, England.

early flying machine

Hot metal can be stretched into rails and cables, ropes,
and delicate wires.

for pulleys and ladders
and hoses and bridges
and fences and winches
and wires and pipes.

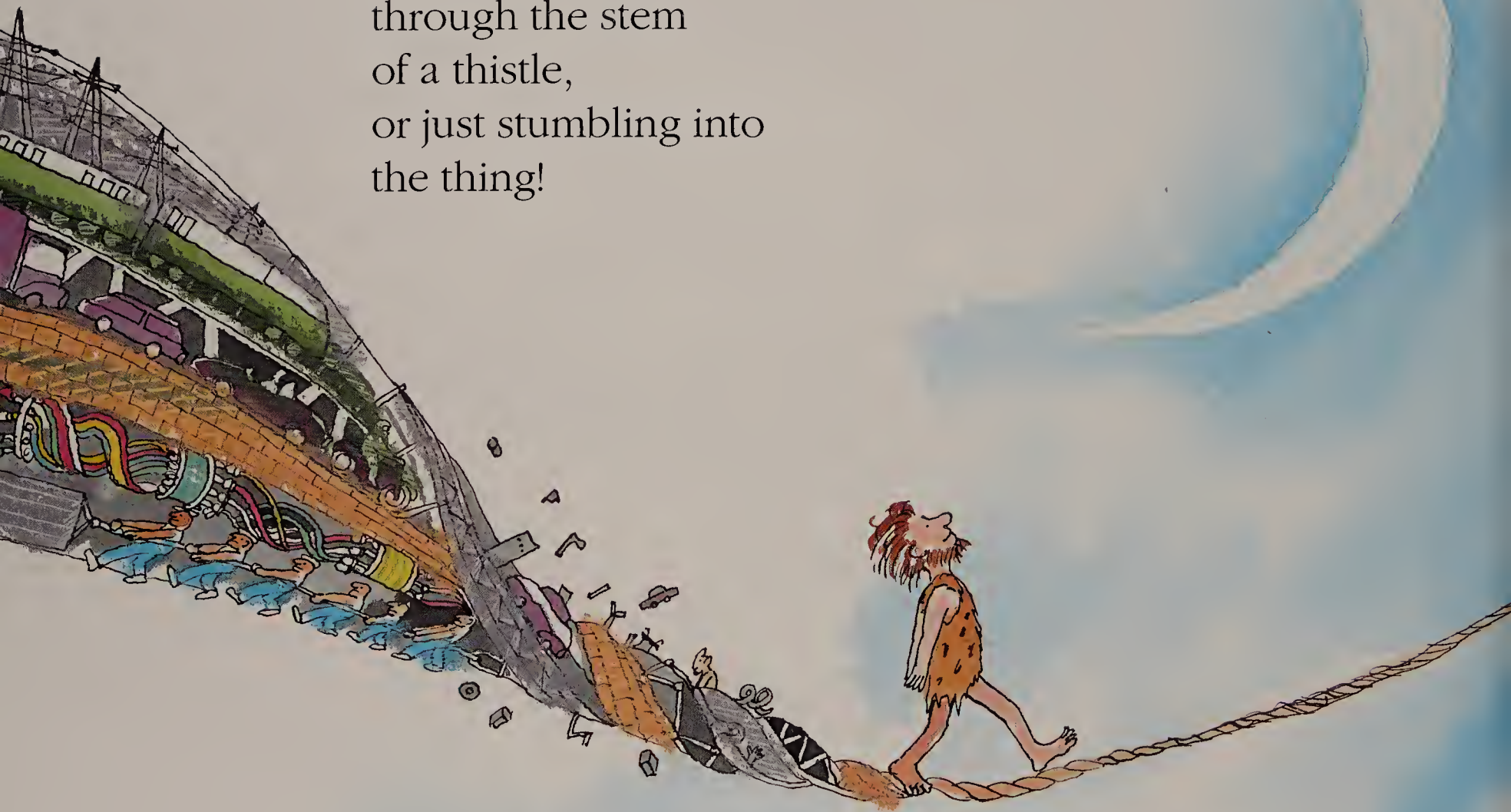


Where on earth
have we come to now?
What would a town
ever do without string
and things that go stringing along?
Candlewicks, rackets, and violins,
telephones, plumbing, and railroad lines,
things that fasten and fuse and fix
and click and stick and link.

Can you even begin
to count the ways
that things connect
with other things?
It could just about
scramble your brain!



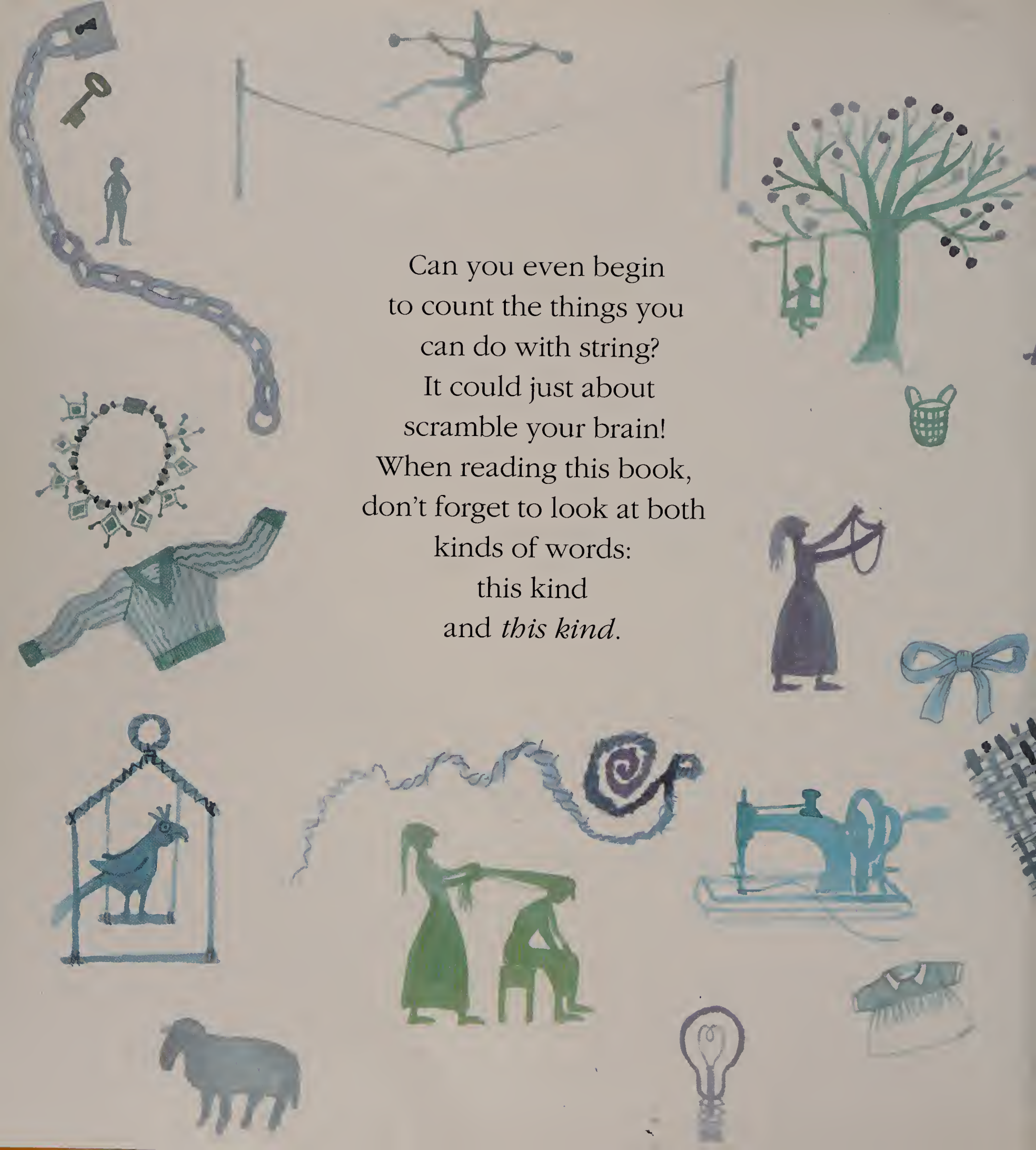
And to think it began
(though we'll never know when)
with somebody choking
on elephant gristle,
or trying to chew
through the stem
of a thistle,
or just stumbling into
the thing!





Oh, what we've done
with a piece of string
is a marvelous thing,
an amazing thing—
some would say
a crazy thing!
And one of these days
I might just go away
and begin it
all over
again . . .

Can you even begin
to count the things you
can do with string?
It could just about
scramble your brain!
When reading this book,
don't forget to look at both
kinds of words:
this kind
and *this kind*.





Judy Hindley was born and grew up in California, but has lived in England for more than twenty years. She graduated from the University of Chicago, has worked in children's book publishing, and now writes full-time. So far, she has written more than thirty books for children, many of them nonfiction titles. In addition to writing, Judy Hindley devotes much of her time to fighting global hunger through a lobbying effort called "Results." She has two grown-up children, and currently lives in Marlborough in Wiltshire, England.

Margaret Chamberlain has illustrated more than fifty books for children. She is interested in the history of art, and she enjoyed doing the picture research for this book. She lives with her husband, a cartoonist, in Bath, England.

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Other *Read and Wonder Books*:

All Pigs Are Beautiful

Think of a Beaver

Think of an Eel

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